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SEX EDUCATION OF OUR CHILDREN†

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Schools, teachers, and principals must help develop good character. To do so, they don't have to reinvent the wheel. They don't have to add special courses or devise new materials for the purpose of instilling character in the young. There is no great mystery or trick to this task — parents and teachers have been doing it for centuries. They simply need to put students in the presence of adults of sound character; adults who know the difference between right and wrong, who will articulate it to children, who will remind them of the human experience with that difference, and who will live that difference in front of them. Aristotle gave us this prescription more than two thousand years ago: In order to teach good character, expose children to good character, and invite its imitation. It has been the experience of mankind, confirmed by the findings of contemporary psychology, that this prescription works, that it still works.

In a classroom devoted to sex education, attention must be paid to character in an explicit, focused way. It would be undesirable, but a teacher could conduct large portions of a class in English or history without explicit reference to questions of character. But to neglect questions of character in a sex education class would be a great and unforgivable error. Sex education has to do with how boys and girls, how men and women, treat each other and themselves. It has to do with how boys and girls, how men and women, *should* treat each other and themselves. Sex education is therefore about character and the formation of character. A sex education course in which issues of right and wrong do not occupy center stage is an evasion and an irresponsibility.

Sex education is much in the news. Many states and localities are considering proposals to implement or expand sex education curricula. And polls suggest that a substantial majority of the American people favor sex education in the schools. It seems reasonable for schools to provide another opportunity for students to become both more knowledgeable

† Based on a speech before the National School Boards Association.

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ble and more thoughtful about this important area of life. To have such matters treated well by adults whom students and their parents trust would be a great improvement on the sex education curriculum available on the streets and on television.

However, after examining for several years the actual form that sex education assumes once it is in the classroom, after surveying samples of the literature available to the schools, and after gaining a sense of the attitudes that pervade some of this literature, I have come to believe that some programs of sex education are not constructive. In fact, they may be just the opposite. In some places, some people are doing an admirable job. But in all too many places, sex education classes are failing to give the American people what they are entitled to expect for their children and what their children deserve.

Seventy percent of all high school seniors had taken sex education courses in 1985, up from sixty percent in 1976. Yet when one looks at what is happening in the sexual lives of American students, the obvious conclusion is that sex education is not doing much good at all. The statistics by which to measure how American children — our boys and girls — are treating one another sexually are little short of staggering:

- *More than one-half of America's young people have had sexual intercourse by the time they are seventeen.

- *More than one million teenage girls in the United States become pregnant each year. Of those who give birth, nearly half are not yet eighteen.

- *Teen pregnancy rates are at or near an all-time high. A twenty-five percent decline in birth rates between 1970 and 1984 is due to a doubling of the abortion rate during that period. More than 400,000 teenage girls now have abortions each year.

- * Unwed teenage births rose 200 percent between 1960 and 1980.

- * Forty percent of today's fourteen-year-old girls will become pregnant by the time they are nineteen.

These numbers are, I believe, an irrefutable indictment of sex education's effectiveness in reducing teenage sexual activity and pregnancies, for these numbers have grown even as sex education has expanded. This is not to suggest that sex education has caused the increase in sexual activity among youth, but clearly it has not prevented it. As Larry Cuban, professor of education at Stanford University, has written, "Decade after decade . . . statistics have demonstrated the ineffectiveness of such courses in reducing sexual activity [and] teenage pregnancy. . . . In the arsenal of weapons to combat teenage pregnancy, school-based programs are but a bent arrow. However, bent arrows do offer the illusion of action."

Why do many sex education courses offer merely the illusion of ac-

tion? Upon examining the literature and materials available to the schools, one often discovers in them a certain pervasive tone, a certain attitude. That attitude is this: Offer students technical information, offer the facts, tell them they have choices, and tell them what the consequences of those choices could be, *but do no more*. And there is the problem.

Several examples illustrate this problem. It is important to note that these are not "worst case" examples — that is, they are not examples of the most controversial and provocative material used in some sex education courses. They are, instead, approaches commonly used in many schools.

A curriculum guide for one of the largest school systems in the country suggests strategies to "help students learn about their own attitudes and behaviors and find new ways of dealing with problems." For example, students are given a so-called "problem situation," asked to "improvise dialogue" and "act it out," and then discuss "how everyone felt about the interactions." In one "problem situation:"

Susan and Jim are married. He becomes intoxicated and has sex with his secretary. He contracts herpes, but fails to tell Susan.

The students are asked,

What will happen in this situation? How would you react if you were Susan and found out?

The so-called "Expected Outcome" of this exercise of "acting out" and "interacting" is to get the student "to recognize sexually transmitted diseases as a threat to the individual."

Another lesson presents a situation of an unmarried girl who has become pregnant. Various parties in her life recommend various courses of action from marriage to adoption to abortion. Having described the situation, the teacher is then supposed to ask the following questions:

Which solution do you like best? Why?

Which solution do you like least? Why?

What would you do if you were in this situation?

The "Expected Outcome" of this exercise is "to identify alternative actions for an unintended pregnancy." What will likely happen in the classroom discussion of this lesson is that someone will opt for one course of action, others will raise their hands and argue for something else, more will speak, the teacher will listen to all opinions, and that will be that. The teacher will move on; perhaps saying the discussion was good, that students should be talking about this, and that as long as they are talking about it, even if they do not arrive at a clear position, they are somehow being educated.

Exercises like these deal with very complex, sensitive, personal, seri-

ous, and often agitated situations that involve human beings at their deepest levels. But the guiding pedagogical instruction to teachers in approaching all such "Sensitive and Personal Issues" is: "Where strong differences of opinion exist on what is right or wrong sexual behavior, objective, informed and dignified discussion of both sides of such questions should be encouraged." And that's it — no more. The curriculum guide is loaded with devices to help students "explore the options," "evaluate the choices involved," "identify alternative actions," and "examine their own values." It provides some facts for students, some definitions, some information, lots of "options" — but that's all.

What's wrong with this kind of teaching? First, it is a very odd kind of teaching because it does not, in fact, teach. Instead, while speaking to a very important aspect of human life, it displays a conscious aversion to making moral distinctions. Indeed, it insists on holding them in abeyance. The words of morality, of a rational, mature morality, seem to have been banished from this sort of sex education.

What is being done in these classes is tantamount to throwing up our hands and saying to our young people: "We give up. We give up on teaching right and wrong to you. Here, take these facts, take this information, and take your feelings, your options, and try to make the best decisions you can. But you're on your own. We can say no more." It is ironic that in the part of our children's lives where they may most need adult guidance, and where indeed I believe they may most want it, too often they find an abdication of responsible moral authority.

If we think that sex for children is serious business, entailing serious consequences, we must be more than neutral about it in front of our young. When adults maintain a studiously value-neutral stance, the likely impression is that, in the words of one twelfth grader: "No one says not to do it, and by default they're condoning it." And a sex education curriculum that simply provides options, and condones by default, is not what the American people want, nor is it what our children deserve.

It is not that the materials used in most of our schools are urging students to go out and have sexual intercourse. In fact, they give reasons why students might want to choose not to have intercourse, and they try to make students "comfortable" with that decision. However, the feeling is sometimes pervasive that, for these guides, being "comfortable" with one's decision and exercising one's "option" is the sum and substance of responsible life. Decisions aren't right or wrong; decisions simply make you comfortable or not. It is as though "comfort" alone had now become our moral compass. These materials are silent as to any other moral standards, any other standards of right and wrong, by which a student might reach a decision to refrain from sex and by which he or she might develop the inner resources to stick by that decision.

It seems that if this is how sex education operates, we should not

wonder at its failure to stem the rising incidence of teenage sex, teenage pregnancies, teenage abortions, and single teenaged parents. One developer of a sex education curriculum recently said, "If you measure success in terms of reduction of teen pregnancy, I don't know if it has been successful. But in terms of orientation and preparation for students to comfortably incorporate sexuality into their lives, it has been helpful." There's that telltale "comfortable." But American parents expect more than that from their schools. Americans consistently say that they want schools to provide reliable standards of right and wrong to guide students through life. In short, I think most Americans want educators to urge not what might be the "comfortable" thing, but the right thing. Why are we so afraid to say what that is?

I believe the American people expect from sex education courses in the schools that their children will be taught the basic information, the relevant biology, the relevant physiology — what used to be called the "facts of life." But they also expect that those facts will be placed in a moral context. In a recent national poll, seventy percent of the adults surveyed said they thought sex education programs should teach moral values, and about the same percentage believe the programs should urge students not to have sexual intercourse. And the sense of adults on this matter is actually confirmed by the young people who take the sex education courses. According to a recent survey, seventh and eighth graders say that the single greatest influence on their intention to engage or not to engage in intercourse is that: "It is against my values for me to have sex while I am a teenager." Social science researchers report that mere factual "knowledge alone has little impact, and that even peer pressure is less powerful" than what they call "the student's internalized beliefs and values."

How, then, might sex education better shape the beliefs and values of our children? It could improve by underpinning the whole enterprise with frank attention to the real issue; responsibility for oneself and for one's actions. In the classroom, as at home, this means explaining and defending moral standards in the area of sex, and offering explicit moral guidance. For example, why not say in schools to students exactly what most American parents say at home: Children should not engage in sexual intercourse. Won't our children better understand such a message, and internalize it, if we say it to them — and if we say it in school as well as at home? Why isn't this message being taught in more classrooms? Why isn't this said?

In general, there seem to be three common excuses as to why the schools cannot teach such lessons in character.

First, it is said that, given the diversity of today's society, it would be impossible to determine whose values to put into the sex education curriculum; and, regardless, it is not proper to indoctrinate the young with

anyone's beliefs. Apparently being "comfortable" with one's decision is the only consensual value left.

This sort of reasoning is unacceptable. When it comes to the well-being of our children, there are certain precepts to which virtually all Americans adhere. For example, I have never had a parent tell me that he or she would be offended by a teacher telling a class that it is better to postpone sex. Or that marriage is the best setting for sex, and in which to have and raise children. On the contrary, my impression is that the overwhelming majority of parents would gratefully welcome help in transmitting such values. They would not view this as indoctrination. It is simply ethical candor. To put students in the presence of a mature adult who speaks honestly and candidly to them in this way is not to violate their rights or to fail to respect their diversity.

Second, it is said that teenage sex is so pervasive now that we should simply face reality and surrender any quaint moral notions we continue to harbor about it. The kids are going to "do it" no matter what, so we ought to be trying to head off pregnancies by making sure they have contraceptives. As a member of one Washington lobbying organization said last month, "All of us wish teenagers wouldn't have sex, but Reagan and Bennett are dealing with the world as they would like it and we're looking at it as it is." However, Reagan and Bennett *are* talking about the world as it is, and it violates everything a school stands for simply to throw in the towel and say, "O.K. We give up. It's not right, but we can't seem to do anything about it, so we're not going to worry about it anymore." That is no lesson in good character, either. Yes, sex entices from many parts of the culture. So does violence. So do drugs. But school is supposed to be better, and do better, and point to a better way. After all, it is possible to accept reality while also trying to shape it and improve it. If school were no better than TV, parents would just leave their children to sit at home and watch the tube all day long. School is supposed to be better. Parents who are trying to do better for their children, who are trying to shape their children's characters, need an ally in the schools. They do not need another opponent, or, almost as bad, an unprotesting "option" provider. Furthermore, not "everybody" is doing it, and we might give those youngsters who are not — half of our seventeen-year-olds — support and reinforcement.

There is simply no reason to assume that efforts to shape character in matters of sex are doomed to fail. In fact, there are encouraging signs to the contrary. A teen services program at Atlanta's Grady Memorial Hospital, for example, found that of the girls under age sixteen it surveyed, nine out of ten wanted to learn how to say "no." This is not just Reagan and Bennett talking. It is girls under sixteen talking. One way to help them say "no" is for adults who care to teach them the reasons to say "no," and to give them the necessary moral support and encourage-

ment to keep on saying it.

The third excuse for giving up on the teaching of character in sex education was stated most recently by a panel of scientific experts. The much publicized report on teenage pregnancy by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences draws a conclusion that few would likely disagree with: Sexual activity among teenagers is intimately connected with issues of self-image. As the report states: "Several studies of social and psychological factors associated with adolescents' sexual behavior conclude that self-perception (not self-esteem) — that is, the sense of what and who one is, can be, and wants to be — is at the heart of teenagers' sexual decision making."

This would be a good starting point for any educational project aimed at helping children understand ways in which premature sex hinders the possibilities of becoming who they can and want to be. But, strangely enough, the National Research Council reverses course by stating: "[W]e currently know very little about how to effectively discourage unmarried teenagers from initiating intercourse." Rather than drawing a conclusion from the studies on self-perception, the Council simply accepts the inevitability of teenage sexual activity, and urges "making contraceptive methods available and accessible to those who are sexually active and encouraging them to diligently use these methods" as "the surest strategy for pregnancy prevention."

One observation in response to this approach is that there is no evidence reflecting that greater availability of contraceptive methods is the surest strategy for preventing pregnancy to say nothing about preventing sexual activity. Nor is it true that "we currently know very little about how to effectively discourage unmarried teenagers from initiating intercourse." It is true that such matters are not easily amenable to being measured and quantified. Nevertheless, we do know how to develop character and reinforce good values. We've known for quite a long time. As columnist William Raspberry has said, you do it the old-fashioned way. It must be made clear to young people that there are moral considerations in life. It must be made clear through habit, example, precept, and the inculcation of priorities. This is not only possible; it has been tested and proven through centuries of experience. The National Research Council is acting with an extravagantly single-minded blindness when it simply, in the name of science, ignores such experience, and offers instead the highly mechanical and bureaucratic solution of more widely available contraceptives in the schools.

The National Research Council's solution betrays a view of sex and of life that is dangerous for our children. To suggest to our children that the only things that matter about sexual activity are pleasure, or "comfort," or getting pregnant, or getting a sexually transmitted disease — to suggest that the act of sexual intimacy is not significant in other ways —

is to offer them still another very bad lesson. Why? Because it's false. It's false because, as every adult knows, sex is inextricably connected to the psyche, to the soul, to personality at its deepest levels. Rarely is it a mere riot of the glands that occurs and then is over and meaningless thereafter. Sexual intimacy changes things. It affects feelings, attitudes, one's self-image, one's view of another. Sexual activity never takes place outside the wider context of what is brought to it or left out of it by the persons who engage in it. It involves men and women in all their complexity. It involves their emotions, desires, and the often contradictory intentions that they bring with them, whether they mean to or not. It is, in other words, a quintessentially moral activity.

All societies have known this and have taken pains to regulate sexual activity. All societies have done so, sometimes wisely, sometimes not, because they have recognized that sex is fraught with mystery and passion, and that sex involves the person at the deepest level of being. As John Donne wrote: "Love's mysteries in souls do grow." Poets, novelists, philosophers, saints, and most psychiatrists have known that the power and beauty of sex lie precisely in the fact that it is not like anything else, that it is not just something you like to do or don't like to do. Far from being value-neutral, sex may be among the most value-loaded of any human activity. It does no good to try to sanitize or deny or ignore this truth. The act of sex involves deep springs of conduct. It is serious. It has complicated and profound repercussions. And if we're going to deal with it in school, we'd better know this and acknowledge it. Otherwise, we should not let our schools have anything to do with it.

Our children, too, ought to know this. They ought to be told. Not to tell them, to make sex out to be something less special and powerful than it is, is a dodge and a lie. It is just as much a dodge as denying the importance of sex or silencing a child who is awakening to an interest in sex. Children are not served by denying their sexuality or by making it a thing of no moral account.

These thoughts suggest a few principles that speak to the task of educating children about sex; principles which should inform curricular materials and textbooks, and by which such materials could be evaluated. These principles are what most American parents are looking for in sex education.

First, we should recognize that sexual behavior is a matter of character and personality, and that we cannot be value-neutral about it. Neutrality only confuses children, and may lead them to conclusions we wish them to avoid. Specifically, sex education courses should teach children sexual restraint as a standard to uphold and follow.

Second, in teaching restraint, courses should stress that sex is not simply a physical or mechanical act. We should explain to children that sex is tied to the deepest recesses of the personality. We should tell the

truth; we should describe reality. We should explain that sex involves complicated feelings and emotions. Some of these are ennobling, and some of them can be cheapening of one's own finer impulses and cheapening to others.

Third, sex education courses should speak up for the institution of the family. To the extent possible, when they speak of sexual activity, courses should speak of it in the context of the institution of marriage. We should speak of the fidelity, commitment, and maturity of successful marriages as something for which our students should strive.

To the girls, teachers need to talk about the readiness for motherhood. In addition, they must not be afraid to use words like "modesty" and "chastity." Teachers and curriculum planners must be sure that sex education courses do not undermine the values and beliefs that still lead most girls to see sexual modesty as a good thing. It is a good thing, and a good word. Let us from time to time praise modesty. And teachers must not be afraid to teach lessons other girls have learned from bitter experience. They should quote one high school student from Alexandria, Virginia, who says of some of her friends: "I get upset when I see friends losing their virginity to some guy they've just met. Later, after the guy's dumped them, they come to me and say, 'I wish I hadn't done it.'"

The boys need to hear these things too. In discussing such matters, teachers should not forget to talk to the boys; they should tell the boys what it is to be a father, what it is to be ready to be a father, and what the responsibilities of being a father are. They should tell them how the readiness and responsibility of being a father should precede or at least accompany the acts which might make them fathers.

Fourth, sex education courses should welcome parents and other adults as allies. They should welcome parents into sex education classrooms as observers. If they do not, there is reason for parents to be suspicious. Parents should be informed of the content of these courses, and should be encouraged to talk with their children about sex. Studies show that when parents are the main source of sex education, children are less likely to engage in sex. This should come as no surprise when one remembers that the home is the crucible of character, and that parents are children's first and foremost teachers.

Many parents admit that they do not do enough to teach their children about sex. But still parents, more than anyone else, make the difference. Sex education courses can help remind those parents of their responsibilities. And these courses should encourage the individual counsel of priests, ministers, rabbis, and other adults who know a child well and who will take the time and offer the advice needed for that particular child. It is the quality of the care and time that individuals take with other individuals that means the most in the formation of character.

Finally, schools, parents and communities should pay attention to

who is teaching their children about sex. They should remember that teachers are role models for young people. And so it is crucial that sex education teachers offer examples of good character by the way they act, and by the ideals and convictions they articulate to students. As Oxford's Mary Warnock has written: "You cannot teach morality without being committed to morality yourself; and you cannot be committed to morality yourself without holding that some things are right and others wrong."

These are some of the principles which should be standing behind our schools' sex education courses. Character education is mostly a matter of common sense. If sex education courses are prepared to deal with the truth, with reality in all its complexity, with the hard truths of the human condition, then they should be welcome in our schools. But if sex education courses are not prepared to tell the truth, if instead they want to simplify or distort or omit certain aspects of these realities in this very important realm of human life, then we should let them go out of business. If sex education courses do not help in the effort to provide an education in character, then let them be gone from the presence of our children.